

**Associated Colleges of the South (ACS)
Summer 2024 Working Group
Courageous Community Conversations
REPORT**

ACS Working Group – Courageous Community Conversations

At the invitation of the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS), Southwestern University Chaplain Dr. Ron Swain applied to form a working group to design a process by which colleges and universities may engage campus and local community members in round-table conversations around topics of mutual concern, particularly the controversial topics that are contributing to division and unrest on campuses and in communities. In our planning, we explored how these conversations could support our educational mission benefitting not only individual learners, but the culture of learning within our campus communities. With expressed interest from faculty and staff representing other ACS member institutions, the working group was approved for Summer 2024.

Members of the working group:

Anene Ejikeme, PhD: ACS Mellon Fellow & Special Assistant to the Provost (2023-2025) and Associate Professor, Department of History, Trinity University

Lavinia Roberts, MA, MFA: Assistant Professor and Murphy Fellow in Theatre Arts, Hendrix College

Alex Serna-Wallender, MA, MDiv: Chaplain, Trinity University

Ron Swain, EdD: Chaplain and Director of Spiritual Life, Southwestern University

Additional participants:

Holly Aker: Student and Summer Intern, Southwestern University

Georgianne Hewett, MSLOC: Facilitator and Community Collaborator

Luke Smith: Student and Summer Intern, Southwestern University

The working group met via Zoom six Wednesdays during the summer for an hour to an hour and a half each time: June 12, June 26, July 10, July 24, August 7, and August 14.

The following guidebook outlines a design that colleges and universities can employ or adapt to host Courageous Community Conversations on topics of concern.

Associated Colleges of the South
A Guide for Designing a
Courageous Community Conversation for Your Campus

What is Courageous Community Conversation?

Courageous Community Conversation is a model for purposely engaging participants with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints in respectful dialogue on topics of mutual interest. Before engaging, each participant agrees to follow guidelines that encourage deep listening so that participants can learn from the perspectives of others while also reflecting upon and sharing their own.

Objectives:

1. Building Trust and Community: Creating a space for trust and community to flourish.
2. Valuing Different Perspectives: Recognizing and appreciating one another as fellow human beings, even when our viewpoints differ.
3. Affirming Personhood: Providing support and affirmation for everyone.
4. Listening Wholeheartedly: Engaging with open ears, open eyes, and open hearts.
5. Promoting Learning: Embracing the opportunity to expand our understanding.
6. Collaborative Action: Identifying actions, we can collectively take to drive positive change on our campuses, in our communities, and around the world.

Hosting Courageous Community Conversations presents many opportunities for campus engagement and development. Conducted outside the classroom, they offer an additional way to develop active listening skills, which is a fundamental capacity for learning. Courageous Community Conversations can help engage the next generation of leaders in dialogue around issues they care about. They also present opportunities for organizations with overlapping interests to collaborate and generate collective action. Courageous Community Conversations support the educational missions of our institutions.

It is important to actively manage the conversation topic, format, setting, and engagement. Designing conversation sessions on your campus is an act of trust-building. Setting the tone, attending to details, and following through will be critical to your success.

SELECTING AND SETTING UP A CONVERSATION SPACE

We recommend holding Courageous Community Conversations in person. Sharing a physical space reduces the barriers that hinder authentic connections. As you consider selecting and setting up a conversation space, consider these tips:

- Seek a relaxed, calm, and comfortable setting - a location that feels spacious and open.
- Set up conversation groups in circles (i.e., at round tables with chairs or with chairs set in circles).
- Invite nature into the space (e.g., bring in plants, position groups near windows, sit outside, etc.).
- Ensure that the acoustics are good. It needs to be easy for participants to speak at a normal volume and be heard. Make sure the distance between groups is sufficient to minimize sound from nearby tables.
- Offer hospitality. Provide snacks and/or drinks, if able.
- Avoid harsh lighting.
- Design for neurodiversity. Recognize that different people experience and interact with the world around them in different ways. Consider creating an environment that enables sensory comfort (e.g., lighting, acoustics, seating, fidget toys, etc.).

GUIDELINES

Entering conversations about difficult topics involves risk. The following guidelines help support a safe, brave space for participants. Read them at the beginning of a session and provide copies at each table. The Lead Facilitator should ask participants to uphold these guidelines and encourage accountability in their conversation groups. Inevitably, mistakes will be made. We are human. Return to the guidelines when needed.

- **Commit to building trust.** Establishing a trusting relationship takes time. How you engage with others matters. Acknowledge your mistakes. Be authentic. Speak only for yourself. Say thank you to those who introduce you to new perspectives and help you grow.
- **Assume positive intent.** We cannot fully understand another's life experiences, motivations, or intentions. Do not automatically assume that someone's intentions are malicious. Be generous. Give them the benefit of the doubt. If their words cause concern, ask "Would you clarify what you meant by ...?" or

state, "I find what you said troubling, but I want to understand where you are coming from. Would you be willing to share how you came to that viewpoint?"

- **Practice deep listening.** Listen to others as you desire to be heard. When someone in your circle is speaking, just listen. Resist the need to form an immediate response and listen for context and meaning. You do not have to agree or disagree. Simply listen.
- **Be curious.** Ask questions. Show interest in understanding how someone developed their views. We don't know what we don't know. Being curious is the key to discovery.
- **Seek to understand, rather than persuade.** This is not a debate or argument. No one will be declared the loser at the end; we are all winners when we learn. The goal is for participants to walk away having learned something new and developed a deeper understanding of their views and the views of others.
- **Respect silence.** Participants are invited to share their thoughts, but they may choose not to. Respect their choice to share or not to share. Also, resist the temptation to fill in the pauses in conversation. Silence can be valuable. It can be used to take a breath, consider what has been said, or reflect on your own thoughts.
- **When things get difficult, turn to wonder.** When your emotions begin to take over, take a deep breath. Take a moment to wonder why you feel so strongly. Take a moment to wonder how someone came to hold their point of view. Take a moment to wonder what values you share with other participants.
- **Identify assumptions and be accountable.** Share your perspective authentically, but do not speak for others. If you are tempted to say "we" or "they," stop yourself. Use "I" statements only. Speak only for yourself. Analyze your own assumptions and biases. Reflect on your behaviors and life experiences. Acknowledge the ways in which we harm one another and commit to doing better.
- **Focus on growth.** If you are present and engaged, every conversation you enter will help you grow in your thinking and understanding. Be open to having your mind changed and heart expanded.

- **Generosity.** Bring your most generous self to the conversation and assume that others are bringing their most generous selves. This means that if someone makes a mistake, we will acknowledge it, but assume that they had good intentions.
- **Sit with feeling uncomfortable.** It isn't always easy to learn what we don't know or think about something we have not ever thought about. Ask yourself, "Why do I feel uncomfortable? What is there for me to learn here?"
- **Acknowledge pain and suffering.** Set an intention to do no harm. Some topics can open old or new wounds for you and for others. Acknowledge painful and traumatic experiences. Support healing by listening and validating one another.

FACILITATORS

In preparation for a Courageous Community Conversation, select a Lead Facilitator(s) who will introduce the session, outline the topic, provide instructions, and support the Table Facilitators. Once the Lead Facilitator(s) is identified, recruit and train Table Facilitators.

Recruiting

While previous facilitation experience is not a requirement for Table Facilitators, it is helpful for both experienced and new facilitators to have the opportunity to practice. Facilitators need to be familiar with the guidelines and the session format. They also need to be knowledgeable about how best to support participants in creating a safe, brave space for conversation. Consider recruiting facilitators from the constituency groups that are being invited (e.g., students, faculty, staff, community members, etc.) Plan a training session at least a week before your scheduled session.

Training

The objectives of the facilitator training are to 1) share the topic and format; 2) review the guidelines; 3) share facilitator tips; and, 4) practice.

Facilitator Tips

Model Deep Listening

- Be attentive and fully present.
- Keep an open mind. Don't judge. Remember, this person's experiences are not your experiences.
- Don't interrupt unless necessary. Don't suggest solutions.

- Focus on what the speaker is saying and how they are saying it.
- Try to picture what the speaker is describing and imagine what the speaker is feeling.
- Acknowledge what the speaker is saying. You do not have to agree.
- Recognize that there are different ways of communicating. For example, some people may feel comfortable with eye contact. Others may not.

It is likely that conflicting truths will be shared. Acknowledge that more than one thing can be true. Invite participants to share their own truth, but also to respect and honor that others have their truths.

If mistrust exists, acknowledge it. One of the objectives of these conversations is to create trusting relationships. The first step is to be truthful.

If your table has several instances of the guidelines not being followed, the facilitator can ask participants to pause and review the guidelines again. Acknowledge that it is hard because this is a different way of communicating. The most common violation is a participant saying "we" or "they." In that case, simply remind them to use "I."

Encourage participants to listen for how people are responding with their feelings. Before getting defensive, recognize that there may be more behind what is being said than what is evident.

To draw participants into the conversation, a facilitator can ask, "Would anyone like to respond?" Or, "Did this resonate with anyone else?"

Remind participants to try to listen without forming responses in their heads.

Make sure that all participants have an opportunity to respond.

Helpful Questions/Suggestions/Statements

- Is there anything more you would like to share?
- Can you tell me what you mean when you say ...?
- Is it possible for you to say more about ...?
- Do you want to come back to ...?
- If you are uncomfortable, you are welcome to stop and take a breath.
- Thank you for sharing.

At the end of a session, acknowledge participants' contributions and express appreciation. It is also helpful to invite the participants to thank one another for sharing and listening.

PARTICIPANTS

Who to Invite

Decide which constituencies you want to invite (e.g., students, faculty, staff, community members, etc.). Depending on the topic, make sure that your invitation list is inclusive. To whom does this topic matter? Try to ensure that diverse voices/perspectives will be represented. It will enrich the conversation.

How Many to Invite

The number you invite depends on the space you have chosen and how many facilitators you have. We encourage you to plan for tables of five participants with a facilitator at each table. You can lower the participant number to four or raise it to six, but that will change the amount of time each person has to respond to questions.

Invitation

In the initial invitation to participants, share the topic and emphasize that they are being invited to be their authentic selves, sharing their thoughts and life experiences, and being honest about their perspectives on the world. In turn, they are being asked to be willing to listen to others share who they are and learn about how their perspectives on the world have been shaped. Participants are expected to keep the content of the conversations confidential.

Making the Case for Participation

Courageous Community Conversations are built on the rationale that conversations are the currency of change. Participating provides the opportunity to positively change the culture on campus and within your community, generate more respectful dialogue, support learning, develop listening skills, and create trusting relationships.

TOPICS AND TIMELINE

Sources for Topics

Topics may be any subject of mutual interest or concern on campus and within your community - critical incidents, current conflicts, subjects drawn from books or documentaries, local issues, institutional reviews, etc. Another option is to bring in a subject matter expert(s) and design the conversation to follow their presentation.

Before choosing a topic, make certain you have a deeper understanding of the communities impacted by the topic. Will this conversation inflame the conflict? Recruit partners who can advise you on different perspectives. Ask them to help you consider the potential consequences. Make sure the topic is framed in an unbiased way. Humanize people. When you are drafting the questions for the conversation, share your drafts with people representing a diversity of viewpoints so you can identify concerns.

Examples from Associated Colleges of the South Member Institutions

Trinity University held conversations around the work of its Trinity Roots Commission which explored racism, inequity, and lack of diversity in the University's history.

Furman University offers Dins Dialogue workshops. The series of workshops is a signature initiative of Furman's Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) Program which was created so that students, faculty, and staff could learn how to have conversations about identities that unite and divide us.

Southwestern University is planning a series of conversations for Fall 2024 to explore whether trust can be created in a liberal arts community to support constructive activism around local, national, and global issues.

Timeline

Establish a timeline for your conversation. We suggest a length of an hour and a half to two hours. Calculate how much time it will take for participants to get food and settle at their tables, then for the lead facilitator to provide an introduction and review the format. Determine the number of participants per table so you can decide how much time you will have for each round of questions. The goal is to keep the conversation moving while also creating an unhurried pace. Encourage participants to set aside any distractions and focus on listening.

As you calculate the time needed for each round of conversation, allot at least one minute (during the introductory round) and two to three minutes (in subsequent rounds) for each person to respond.

Keeping Time

To ensure that all participants have time to share, consider appointing a timekeeper or using a device like an egg timer to make sure that no one participant dominates. You

can also employ a talking stick or a talking stone to encourage participants not to talk over one another.

Sample Timeline - Six Participants Per Table

Adjust as you see fit. You may only want three rounds of conversation. Or, you may want to have fewer participants per table so there is more time per participant each round. Remember that you want the pace to feel unhurried.

Check-in and Lunch/Refreshments – 15 minutes

Welcome and Introductions – 5 minutes

Format and Timeline – 5 minutes

Conversation Round One – 6 minutes (1 minute per participant)

Conversation Round Two – 12 minutes (2 minutes per participant)

Conversation Round Three – 12 minutes (2 minutes per participant)

Conversation Round Four – 18 minutes (3 minutes per participant)

What Was Learned – 12 minutes

Appreciation and Closing Remarks – 5 minutes

Total Time: 90 minutes

FORMAT

One of the responsibilities of the Lead Facilitator is to provide a welcome and an introduction to the format and timeline. It is important to set expectations. First, thank the participants for devoting time. Next, invite participants to set aside any distractions and get fully grounded in the space. There are numerous ways to do that. For example, invite participants to:

- Take some deep breaths.
- Shake out the tensions from their bodies.
- State an intention.
- Count down as a group.

Acknowledge that participants may have fears about sharing their authentic selves. Remind participants that what is said by others in these conversations is not to be shared outside of this space.

The first round of conversation should be a warm-up to introduce the participants at a table to one another. The question should be easy to answer without much reflection.

The subsequent rounds should include questions about the topic where participants can share and analyze their own perspectives with increasing depth.

This is not a debate. These conversations are about listening and learning. Depending on the topic, you may decide you want tables to explore common ground or shared values, but the objective is not to identify a winning argument.

SUPPLIES

The supplies you need for Courageous Community Conversations include:

Food and Drinks

We encourage you to serve food and drinks. Offering hospitality, whether a lunch or dinner buffet or snacks and drinks, helps create a welcoming environment. It gives participants a means of connecting as they sit down at a table with people they do not know.

Table Supplies

Guidelines for the tables
Format and Timeline for each participant
Nametags
Sharpie Pens

Other Resources

Video clips, passages, or quotations
Projector, if needed
Fidgets to place on tables
Pens and paper for doodling or writing notes

RESOURCES

We have provided a few of the resources we discussed or were recommended to us during our working group sessions.

Guides

Better Discourse: A Guide for Bridging Campus Divides in Challenging Times

<https://compact.org/news/announcing-better-discourse-a-guide-for-bridging-campus-divides-in-challenging-times>

Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/publications/lets-talk>

Content

A Palestinian and an Israeli, Face to Face | Aziz Abu Sarah and Maoz Inon | TED

<https://youtu.be/0juLRi90kRg?si=5dUYWZ1ScqwmKpX>

Other College and University Efforts

Dartmouth Dialogue

<https://dialogueproject.dartmouth.edu/>

Dialogue Vanderbilt

<https://www.vanderbilt.edu/dialogue-vanderbilt/>

Carnegie Mellon Deeper Conversations

<https://www.cmu.edu/leadership/deeper-conversations/>

THANK YOU

We would like to thank the Associated Colleges of the South for the opportunity to design a model for holding Courageous Community Conversations. We believe higher education has an important role to play in cultivating a culture of constructive conversation - conversation from which participants learn about themselves and others, deepen their understanding of the world in which they live, and discover possible solutions for conflicts. Focusing on the skills necessary to hold these courageous conversations and practicing them in safe, brave spaces is an approach that we believe will have a generative effect, elevating conversation as a powerful tool for learning communities.

This effort is just a start. While we designed Courageous Community Conversations for local campuses and communities, the model could be expanded. We envision future work wherein Associated Colleges of the South member institutions collaborate to host inter-institutional conversations on topics of mutual concern. Imagine the possibilities.